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Author: Lawrence Jackson
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Geography Is Fate

1913–1916

OKLAHOMA CITY'S 407 East First Street buzzed with excitement as Ida Ellison, whom close friends called "Brownie," neared term in early 1913. She and her husband Lewis[1] lived in an apartment in a large rooming house owned by J. D. Randolph and his family. Because the Ellisons had already lost an infant son, Alfred, born shortly after their marriage,[2] the Randolph clan was paying extra-special attention to their "kissing cousin" from Georgia, assuring that Ida was well fed and comfortable, and had few chores to perform. On March 1, 1913,[3] matriarch Uretta Randolph and her mother Thomas Foster helped deliver the Ellisons' first healthy offspring into the world.

Lewis Ellison, then working as a driver, seems to have been principally responsible for his son's name. He named his second son Ralph Waldo after the famous American poet and philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson. After the loss of his first child, Lewis Ellison had developed an acute interest in the correlation between name and destiny. He was determined to invest enormous potential in his infant son.

The choice of name showed no vague desire to link the boy's destiny with a famous American. Lewis wanted to think majestically about his son's future. He deliberately named his son after the founder of the American Renaissance in literature and philosophy, telling family and friends that he was "raising this boy up to be a poet."[4] Emerson was certainly one of the best-known writers and thinkers of turn-of-the-century America; he seems to have been Ellison's favorite writer. Ellison probably had read the easily available poetry

or essays of Emerson while stationed at a Southwestern military post. Certainly his landlord J. D. Randolph, the former principal of Oklahoma City's lone black school, had Emerson's significant works. And Emerson's famous poem "Threnody," addressing the death of a son, might have consoled Lewis and Ida after burying tiny Alfred. The name bestowed on the first boy had been a peace-making gesture toward "Big" Alfred, Lewis's father; this child would represent his own inclinations and dreams. Lewis named his son, hoping that the boy would not have to spend his life digging ditches or breaking stones. Besides reflecting Lewis's own literary interests, the name indicated enormous pride and a bit of pretension, if not outright showing off, about the potential of a black boy born outside of the South. Clearly, in passing over the name of the renowned black poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, for example, Lewis Ellison was expressing the wish that his son's life would not be as defined by race as was his own. Ellison felt strongly that black destiny in America was linked to literacy and social equality, even when it meant moving next door to whites and brushing aside the cherished customs of the South. Lewis Ellison would develop a close and affectionate bond with his son, who nearly shared the same birthday with him.

Born in the newly ratified state of Oklahoma, Ralph Waldo Ellison represented ambition to his parents. Like most black Oklahomans, Ellison's father Lewis was something of a pioneer, something of a refugee. Lewis Ellison—five feet eleven inches tall with light brown skin—had spent his youth as a soldier and as an entrepreneur. To Ralph, Lewis's travels would become legendary. Even after death, his father would remain the magnanimous and wise centurion, the sensitive but conquering hero.

Lewis Ellison, born on March 4, 1877,[5] grew to manhood in one of the most violent and racially contested regions in the post-Reconstruction era South, up-country South Carolina. The son of Alfred and Harriett Ellison, Lewis spent his childhood on a farm, not far from the town of Abbeville, the local county seat for Abbeville County, South Carolina. The county of his birth, just across the Savannah River from Georgia, where black citizens verged on outnumbering whites two to one, was marked by a high level of racial tension that periodically exploded.

Ralph's grandfather Alfred had been born a slave in Fairfield County, South Carolina, in August 1837. He and twenty-seven bondpeople were owned by widow Mary Ann Ellison.[6] Mrs. Ellison sold her plantation in 1855 to the ambitious entrepreneur of her generation, David Aiken. It is possible that ten-year-old Alfred moved with Mary Ellison into Abbeville; but if he was well-developed and strong, as his later name "Big" Alfred suggests, he probably headed into Aiken's cotton field. If he became Aiken's property,

which is likely, then Alfred exchanged the temperate slavery of his youth for significantly harsher bondage as an adolescent and young adult.

The son of an Irish immigrant, Aiken owned several large plantations and "scientifically" farmed cotton. After serving the Confederacy as a colonel in the Civil War, he had become the most outspoken opponent of black enfranchisement in Abbeville County. An 1868 state investigating committee charged Aiken, a violent man, with administering scores of beatings, committing arson, and inciting whites to murder at least four blacks.[7] Whether Alfred Ellison served on Aiken's plantation or not, he could not have grown up without knowing of formidable opponents to black freedom. Alfred's inevitable experience with men like Aiken callused him and inspired his own self-determination. He became a member of the Union League, committing himself to protecting black elected officials such as Hutson Lomax, Abbeville's black commissioner of elections. Noting the severity of racial strife in his region following the Civil War, Lomax had proposed that a colored man should monitor each polling place in Abbeville to ensure polling booth equity.[8] During the era of the Reconstruction, when federal troops were garrisoned throughout the South, black people seemed poised to spring far away from their origins in servitude.

By 1870, the thirty-three-year-old Alfred, now a freeman of four years, was married to nineteen-year-old mulatto-looking Harriett Walker. The couple, along with Alfred's ten-year-old brother William, decided to make their home where they had gained freedom. Alfred and Harriett worked as domestics. Alfred Ellison could neither read nor write, but his wife Harriett could read. By the time Lewis was three, the Ellison family farmhouse on Magazine Hill, off Poplar Street, was filled with children: eight-year-old Janie, seven-year-old Creesy (Lucretia), five-year-old Sallie, and one-year-old James. William Ellison had become the local schoolteacher.[9]

While working as a domestic, Alfred grasped the reality of Southern racial politics and made the most of a tenuous situation. Relying on his common sense and robust physique, Alfred became town marshal of Abbeville in the early part of the decade.[10] His was a Faustian bargain. His youth as a slave in a cotton-heavy region had taught him to cultivate powerful white allies. He won the office with the influence of powerful whites like Aiken, who wished to abolish black rights. Part of the price of keeping his job was enforcing laws aimed at ending black enfranchisement.

After the pivotal election of 1876, known as "Big Tuesday," an event celebrated by local whites for the next seventy years, Republican rule—the party of Lincoln—ended, and with its ouster went the federal troops. Though black enfranchisement remained alive for some years under the benign white supremacy of Governor Wade Hampton (who had entitled his campaign pledge and booklet "Free Men! Free Ballots!! Free Schools!!!"), ultimately it, too, came to an end. Black men like Ellison, public figures, had little terrain

upon which to maneuver. Factions of Democratic cavalry called Red Shirts and Ku Klux riders, sometimes numbering in the hundreds, routinely assaulted and shot up black Republicans—even U.S. marshals such as Louis Waller and A. M. Heard.[11] Four months before the election, white supremacists had helped guarantee its outcome by massacring the politically important black militia at nearby Homburg, South Carolina. Even though he ably performed his tasks and voted for the Democratic Party's candidate Hampton (a liberal on race issues), Alfred Ellison lost his job at the end of the Reconstruction period. While Ellison admitted voting for Hampton in 1876, he snorted to those who cared to listen, "I am not a democrat."[12] Neither his words nor his realpolitik could change the coming tide. In September of 1878, Abbevillians elected John Kirby as town marshal.

After the return of "Home Rule" to the South, the job of town marshal of Abbeville became nearly impossible for a black man to hold. The marshal's duties involved more than merely countenancing white supremacy. One of the most important functions was to enforce the rigid vagrancy laws of South Carolina, aimed at keeping available an abundant pool of cheap labor. If found on the street without the approval of a reputable white, black men were quickly imprisoned and then farmed out to various businesses under the brutal convict-lease system, which sometimes surpassed slavery in its harshness. Employers had little long-term interest in the convicts and worked them under inhuman conditions with minimal concern for their safety. Particularly notorious was the 1879 attrition rate of "Stockade No. 5" in Edgefield County, where 128 prisoners died, some of them not even fourteen years old.[13] The prisoners had been farmed out to the railroad, laying trestles in the swamp land between Greenwood, South Carolina, and Augusta, Georgia. Even though blacks constituted a majority of the population in Abbeville County, their political rights were in great jeopardy.

Throughout his youth, Lewis Ellison was a witness to racial brutality. When he was five, a black man, Dave Roberts, was taken from the town jail and lynched in the town square.[14] Alfred and Harriett Ellison sent their son to school in order to prepare him for a better life than their own. His uncle William apparently taught him to read and write; but Lewis, the first male child growing up on a labor-intensive farm, would have been extraordinarily lucky to have received schooling through the eighth grade. As Lewis reached the age of learning a trade in the early 1890s, the viciousness of racial prejudice set in. Some years earlier in 1885, shortly after the election of Grover Cleveland, the first Democratic president since the Civil War, the black Northern journalist T. McCants Stewart of the New York *Freeman* traveled to his native South Carolina to offer a candid assessment of Southern prejudice. He found almost nothing to complain about, and viewed the races operating in public places fraternally. "I feel about as safe here as in Providence,

R.I. I can ride in first-class cars on the railroads and in the streets."[15] But the ensuing decade had dashed any optimism about the Palmetto State. After the Supreme Court *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision of 1896, the triumph of negrophobic politicians, and the erection of rigid barriers to prohibit interracial socialization, the economic exploitation of the Negro farmer and laborer would rival that of the former slave regime.

Lewis Ellison did not lack courage. In 1898 when he reached twenty-one, Lewis left Alfred and Harriett Ellison and the peace they had made with Abbeville. Obviously he wished neither to submit to the newly minted and insulting jim crow social customs nor to wind up in the county stockade. One of the few occupations open to him was laying trestles for the Southern Railroad. In 1900, his teenage brothers James and Robert were working as shop laborers for the Southern. Barely fifteen, Lewis's youngest brother, William, was an office boy at the local cotton mill. Lewis left—probably in May 1898. Before the year's end, another South Carolina racial massacre had taken place close to Abbeville in the village of Phoenix. Red Shirt cavalry mercilessly struck twelve blacks at random on November 9 and 10, following a botched attempt to organize black voters for the general election.[16] Instead of competing with the chain gang for unsavory jobs, or coming into open conflict with local whites or perhaps his own father over politics, Lewis moved, temporarily, to Atlanta.

In his heart he nurtured a dream of adventure and recognition, now tantalizingly possible. Congress had declared war on Spain in April, seven weeks after a deadly explosion aboard the USS *Maine,* anchored in the harbor of Havana, Cuba. With the ditty "Remember the Maine!/ To hell with Spain" in the air, and having heard glowing reports of Commodore Dewey's naval victory over the Spanish fleet in the Philippines, Lewis enlisted on May 31, 1898, in the Twenty-fifth U.S. Colored Infantry, under the supervision of Captain James Ord.[17] The Southwestern exploits of the Ninth and Tenth U.S. Cavalries—the fearless black Indian fighters called "Buffalo Soldiers"—were widely known, and not long after the commencement of hostilities, young Lewis Ellison had decided to join up. He entered the service to sustain his bid for independent adulthood. Lewis no doubt noticed the connection between being a soldier in uniform and his dad's old job as town marshal. He wanted to outmaneuver more than escape the older man.

Lewis joined the army in the era of American imperial expansion. Military service presented an opportunity for a black man to command the respect of the citizens he was sworn to protect or whose interests he would advance. There was no small amount of pride, too, in serving under the Ohioan and ex-Union soldier William McKinley and the Republicans, who had taken back the White House in 1896. In the uniform of Uncle Sam, whites might accord black men a degree of dignity and respect.

While the hostilities with Spain in Cuba caught all the newsprint, Lewis waited out the Spanish American War in boot camp at Chicamauga Park, Georgia, becoming accustomed to the rigor and discipline of life in the U.S. military. After he had mastered close order drill and platoon tactics, and learned to operate his Krag-Jorgenson bolt-action rifle, the raw recruit mustered into F Company of the Twenty-fifth Infantry on September 10, 1898, at Camp Wickoff in Montauk, Long Island.[18] Ellison joined a seasoned outfit. The unit had outfought Spanish Regulars in the war and had seen action at the battles of El Caney and Santiago in the first week of July 1898.[19] Ellison was among the new recruits bringing the regiment back up to full strength after the cessation of hostilities. Soon the War Department parceled out the all-black Twenty-fifth to the sparsely populated territories of the American West, where they caused little controversy and served outpost and garrison duties in New Mexico, Arizona, and Colorado.

Lewis Ellison went on a 2,600-mile train ride with F Company to Fort Bayard in what is now southwestern New Mexico. Established shortly after the Civil War, Fort Bayard guarded the Pinos Altos mining district and Silver City from Apache marauders. Not far from the Mimbres River, the fort sat at the base of the Santa Rita mountains. Ellison adjusted to the desert and then proved himself adept at several unsoldierly activities. One of them was gardening, the other was reading. After a few weeks on a post covered with cactus, the South Carolina native became the gardener of Fort Bayard. With nearly a half-dozen assistants, Ellison oversaw a huge agricultural project of perhaps fifteen acres, yielding many thousands of pounds in spinach, lettuce, cabbage, okra, celery, squash, tomatoes, and more. His fellow troopers appreciated the man who ably supplemented their meager rations. When not irrigating a field or answering a call for guard duty, Ellison made use of the fort's library, excellent by U.S. Army standards. His post carried fifteen subscriptions, including *Harper's Weekly, Puck,* the *New York Herald,* and *The Nation.* As a literate trooper, he also may have had the opportunity to teach or study in the extraordinary Chaplain Allen Allensworth's post school, specializing in elementary education for the black troops. Fort Bayard's Allensworth, one of the few black chaplains in the West, pioneered army educational services for enlisted men.[20]

Military service suited Ellison. He decided to reenlist after half a year in the dry desert heat. On March 2, 1899, Captain Ord judged him to possess a "very good" character—a superior evaluation—when he issued Ellison a recommendation for reenlistment.[21] Ellison was a man of quality, seemingly destined for a noncommissioned officer rank.

After six months on the Mexican border, F Company and the rest of the Twenty-fifth received orders to go to the Philippine Islands in the South Pacific to help quell the Filipino national independence movement led by the

young general Emilio Aguinaldo. Since February, U.S. volunteer regiments had fought the superior forces of Filipino nationalists. The year before, Aguinaldo's rebel army had helped the American naval hero Commodore Dewey to take Manila, but Aguinaldo's plans for an independent state had run afoul of U.S. diplomatic aims. Whereas Congress had amended a clause to its declaration of military action preventing the annexation of Cuba, no such prohibition protected the territory of the Philippines, seen as a desirable ornament for the maintenance of global power. Ellison's regiment left for Manila from the U.S. Army's San Francisco military installation at the Presidio, close to the Golden Gate Bay. The unit arrived at the Philippine capital July 31.[22] When the black soldiers began to disembark onto the streets of Manila, white American bystanders spat out to them, "What are you coons doing here?" The proud black troops, vested in irony, and being scholars of the white American psyche, replied unflappably in the popular language of Kipling, "We've come to take up the white man's burden."[23]

More than sixty thousand American troops, or about three-quarters of the U.S. Army, were in the field by the summer of 1899. Lewis's company learned mainly about garrison duty and combat drilling following their arrival in the Philippines. The rainy tropical climate was bleak, and in characteristic fashion the black American soldiers were undersupplied. Many companies spent the war guarding telegraph lines. The Twenty-fifth regiment held a line between the towns of Caloocan and La Loma the first couple of months, until the troops engaged negroid-looking Philippine insurgents on October 9. During the ninety-minute defense of the lines, a musician from E Company was killed, but Lewis Ellison acquitted himself with particular valor and cool thinking, ably handling his Krag. The next day, Ellison had every reason to believe in the American dream of upward mobility. He received a field commission. Company commander First Lieutenant H. C. Clark appointed Ellison lance corporal, a promotion that brought increased pay and made him a noncommissioned officer.[24] Lewis may have set his sights on becoming a staff sergeant.

The company then moved to the mountainous Zambales province, the region where F Company spent most of the war. In December 1899, Missourian John Straat, a freshly appointed lieutenant, took over command of Ellison's unit. After a couple of weeks of rapid movement around the province, marching one hundred miles in four days and reconnoitering distant towns for enemy activity, Straat reduced Ellison back to his original rank of private. It is conceivable that there was an infraction of one of the many rules governing soldierly behavior in the field. The Missourian may have disliked the corporal, described in his military records with a scar over his eye, or thought him unremarkable and unnecessarily distinguished by two stripes. Despite a sterling reputation, Ellison rejoined the masses of black privates.

Meanwhile the damp war turned hot. An incredible boost to morale was the January 1–6 battle at Iba, Zambales, where one thousand of Aguinaldo's troops attacked F and I Companies and received over one hundred casualties from the by now well-acclimated black servicemen. The Twenty-fifth emerged unscathed. The open field combat of Iba would be one of the last traditional military battles of the war, as toward the end of 1899 Aguinaldo turned entirely to guerrilla warfare. During the same week as the success at Iba, other companies from the Twenty-fifth did not fare so well. The Filipinos captured three members of the regiment and tortured them to death, horribly mutilating the men. Many of the companies were in the field with young, untried superiors while their captains remained stateside or in major Philippine cities on detached service assignments. The guerrilla war made it difficult to tell the difference between civilians and enemy soldiers, and U.S. soldiers found themselves consistently retaking towns and territories where they had fought earlier battles. Malaria started to take its deadly toll on the black troops, who were imagined immune to tropical disease by higher-ups in the War Department. The winter and spring brought virtually no enemy activity, but on July 15, 1900, F Company sustained an attack that cost Corporal James Ward his life. The rest of the summer brought little action, and in early fall, F Company returned to garrison duty at Palauig.

Lewis Ellison slogged on through the tedious routines. On November 19, 1900, he participated in a raid alongside other specially selected soldiers.[25] He had nerve as a soldier, but the rigid structure of military life ultimately did not reward him. By December 30, after more than a year in the field, Lewis Ellison had contracted malarial fever and constipation severe enough that he had to be sent to the rear, probably to Manila. He returned to his unit in a weakened condition on January 22, 1901. His company was now stationed in the town of Botolan in the province of Zambales.

As a man into the third year of his enlistment, he earned more than many of the privates in his company and was generous, lending his pay to the men who indulged in cards. Lewis himself did not gamble. After taps on the evening of January 26, before evening gambling got into full swing, Ellison went into a small shanty off post to collect his money. Because gambling violated army regulations, to avoid reprimand, the men took their leisure off the base. While avoiding one military regulation, they were in violation of another, requiring them in the barracks after taps was blown. Mysteriously and without warning, Lieutenant Straat appeared in the off-post shanty that evening, accompanied by the first sergeant. Immediately, the lieutenant ordered every man present put on a list and punished. The soldiers were given two additional hours of drill in full packs per day, one session taking place from 2:30 to 3:30 P.M., the pinnacle of afternoon heat.

Two days later, Lewis Ellison requested that corporal Elijah Reynolds arrange an audience with Straat to explain his special circumstances: drill in

full pack was impossible. Ellison still took medicine under a physician's orders to recover from malaria and constipation. Corporal Reynolds knew Ellison well and respected him as a soldier; he marched the private to their company commander. Reynolds briefly explained the situation to Straat, who quickly became enraged. Straat seems to have thought Ellison the ringleader of F Company's confidence men and shirkers. The lieutenant threatened to have Ellison hung by his thumbs if the trooper did not put on his pack and shoulder his rifle. Ellison sensed the situation getting out of hand and requested an audience higher up the chain of command with the regimental commander, Colonel Burt, a suggestion that further enraged the lieutenant. Straat again ordered Ellison to drill, and threatened him and the other men with death if they did not march the post. Led by Ellison, the men all refused and threw down their packs. They were arrested and taken to the stockade for confinement. Straat put in papers for Lewis Ellison's court-martial and dishonorable discharge, along with William Bell, William Bigby, Moses Fowler, Robert Jones, and Alexander Peyton. During the three months that Ellison was in the stockade awaiting trial, American commandos captured the Filipino general Aguinaldo, ending most of the organized resistance on the island.

On the morning of April 9, 1901, a military tribunal made up of the all-white officers from the Twenty-fifth tried Private Lewis Ellison with violating the Articles of War, numbers 20, 21, 31, and 62. Second Lieutenant George Deiss served as the judge advocate. The first two charges were most serious. Straat had accused Ellison of behaving with "gross disrespect, acting in an insolent, defiant and unsoldierly manner towards his Commanding Officer" and refusing to obey "a lawful command of his Commanding Officer 1st. Lieutenant John N. Straat."[26] Ellison pleaded "not guilty" to the charges and told a compelling story of personal illness as his reason for refusing the command of his superior. In the most formal and serious ceremony of his life, he told the tribunal:

> When the sergeant read the punishment to me I said "Sergeant I am just out of the hospital I'm not able to stand that punishment" and I said as this is my first offense in not discharging my duty properly and having been only 11 days out of the hospital I thought may be that if I could get to make an explanation to the Lieutenant that he might be more lenient and give me a court martial. But Doc Mauley told me before I left the hospital that to go to the hospital steward at Botolan every day and get medicine to work out of my system the malaria and cure my constipation. . . .
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> Taking the lieutenant from the way he looked every day and the way he looked that day I thought him to be very very angry. Then he came down stairs he went outside and said "You men fall in here." I falls in he calls roll, after he called the roll being the first chance to see the lieutenant I said "Lieutenant, I like a chance to make an explanation regarding my case." After he would not give me a chance to make an explanation I said to him

> "Lieutenant I don't think I'm being treated right." I said as this is my first offense "I'd like permission to make an explanation to the lieutenant if the lieutenant would give me a court martial instead of this punishment." As he would not let me speak to him and the lieutenant appeared to get more angry than at first, I said to him "Lieutenant I like to have permission to make an explanation." He ordered the First Sergeant [Haynes] out and hang me by my thumbs if I didn't serve the punishment. He said these men will serve the punishment or I will kill them.

The court briefly adjourned, and reconvened at 11 A.M. The only question the tribunal considered was whether Private Ellison had disobeyed a direct order from his commander. Despite accolades from noncommissioned officers Sergeant William Haynes and Corporal Reynolds, who determinedly made a point to mention Ellison's excellent service record during cross-examination, the court refused to excuse the facts. Repeatedly the judges fired the same question to each witness, culminating with Lewis Ellison's own damaging testimony.

RESPONDENT: Did the Lieutenant order you to drill?
ANSWER: Yes sir, after he came out.
RESPONDENT: Did you drill?
ANSWER: No sir.

After slight deliberation, the tribunal found Ellison guilty of each charge, with a few minor alterations. The court changed its charge of "lying out" of quarters after taps to "remain[ing]" and decided that though the private had not engaged in a game of cards, Ellison had still disobeyed the sixty-second article of war. The military judges remanded their prisoner to the stockades of the Presidio de Manila for two years at hard labor, followed by a dishonorable discharge. Ellison seems to have had his sentence reduced and to have left the service in July 1901, deprived of his pension and forfeiting all his pay and allowances. The only other dot on the historical record came in January 17, 1902, when Lewis, apparently stateside and free, requested a copy of the proceedings of his court-martial. After his muster out of the service, Lewis returned to his family in Abbeville, chastened and in less than vigorous health, stripped of the tangible benefits of three years of military service.

Civilian life at home offered little relief to the prematurely retired soldier. Abbeville had grown no kinder in its ritualized injustice toward black citizens. The U.S. Army under Republican administrations had been a logical place for a relatively ambitious but informally educated black man from the South just two years following the *Plessy* Supreme Court decision. Ellison's return to the South Carolina of racial demagogue "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman and the party of Jefferson Davis signaled personal defeat. He worked as a laborer for a few years, repairing his health and saving cash for another move. First Lewis, likely in partnership with his brother James, opened an ice cream parlor and

confectionery for blacks in Abbeville,[27] who like other black Southerners routinely were forced to the rear steps and kitchens of every eating establishment in the South. This undertaking was short-lived, and may have foundered because of the intense determination of whites in all classes to eliminate black entrepreneurs. As late as 1916, Abbevillians would lynch Anthony Crawford after the well-off black farmer refused to have his cotton ginned at a store where he had been meanly insulted. An angry group of whites beat Crawford to death, raked his body with gunfire, then ceremoniously hung the corpse in the town square.[28] There would come a point during those days in October 1916 when even seventy-nine-year-old "Big" Alfred Ellison would have to make a rough but sincere plea before local whites to end the violence.[29]

Stunned at the tenacity of antiblack prejudice and the economic exploitation that fed it, Lewis had a decision to make regarding his future. Like thousands of his neighbors, who migrated en masse to faraway places like Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, he began to pick his way west.

Lewis Ellison seems to have had a connection with another disgraced black soldier and South Carolina native, Charles Whittaker. Whittaker would have talked excitedly about the new territories that Lewis had taken stock of on his way out to Fort Bayard in New Mexico. Whittaker had already determined to try them out on his own, and set out for the recently established state of Oklahoma in 1908. Ellison's service in New Mexico had given him a certain degree of confidence in his ability to survive on the frontier and a general familiarity with the Southwest. His years in the military also gave him status among other blacks and whites. Another advantage Ellison had was the family's work history on the railroads and in local construction projects. Most exceptionally, his tenure building railroad lines had included some experience with pouring concrete.

So Ellison moved west to Chattanooga, Tennessee, where he applied his skills in erecting concrete and steel buildings. The work was plentiful, but racial violence remained a constant threat. Many black Tennesseans sought escape by moving north, others west. Certainly a critical mass of black Tennesseans, particularly from the town of Gallatin, were making a concerted effort to get to Oklahoma. The promises of the Afro-American Colonization Company in Guthrie, Oklahoma, might have lured Lewis out to the new state, which had recently consolidated from portions of the former Indian Territory. Education was to have a new priority. The famous Oklahoman Edward P. McCabe, the former state auditor of Kansas and the highest black elected official outside the South, had already donated the land for Oklahoma's Colored Agricultural and Normal University at Langston.[30] And certainly Lewis recognized the names of some of the all-black towns—Boley, Langston, Taft, Vernon, and Lincoln City—where Negro self-determination was not a crime. Oklahoma loomed as a potential black Atlantis.

Though it seemed providential, Oklahoma City, a city founded by a land run and thus literally established overnight, promised to challenge even the most ardent settler. Oklahoma, whose name was a Choctaw neologism for "red people," differed remarkably from the old South. Blacks had obtained firm ground in Oklahoma City by the time Lewis Ellison pitched a tent on the banks of the Southwest city's largest estuary, the Canadian River. Negroes had been among the six thousand "Sooners" who settled Oklahoma City in the Run of April 1889, when the Southwestern metropolis consisted of empty prairie, tracks from the Santa Fe railroad, and a tree line by the fork of the North Canadian river.[31]

Prior to the Civil War, the entirety of the Territory had been the exclusive province of Native Americans. The Five Civilized Tribes, as the former East Coast Indian nations were collectively known—Choctaw, Creek, Cherokee, Chickasaw, and Seminole—had moved west for resettlement in the 1830s and brought slaves with them.[32] But the plantations of Cherokee and Choctaw had not been in the same league as those in the rebellious Southern states, and in 1860, Oklahoma contained fewer than eight thousand bondpeople.[33] Still, during the Civil War, landholding Native Americans had aligned themselves with the Confederacy, and after the war had their lands reapportioned as a punishment for their secession. The federal reapportionment following the Civil War marked the end of Native American sovereignty in Oklahoma and began the process of carving up chunks of land for new settlers. Officially the 1889 Springer Amendment opened the remainder of the vast Oklahoma territory to non-Native American settlement. For the former bondpeople of the relocated Indian tribes, the Territory possessed a tradition of slavery, which the former slaves, known as "natives," were now conspicuously throwing off. In fact, some of the "natives" resisted the flood of Negro migrants to Oklahoma because they considered the Southern black newcomers timid and submissive to whites.[34] But around the time of the first land runs in the late 1880s, the tensions between whites and blacks were slight. Land was plentiful, and white settlers at the time worried more about their crops in the field than matters of politics and racial caste.

In Oklahoma City, black migrants initially clustered on a couple of acres in the southeastern portion of the city called "Southtown," an area bounded by old Washington Street and extending north to Choctaw Street.[35] Bracketed to the north and west by rail lines, and teeming with drifters and ne'er-do-wells, Southtown was the least-desirable quarter of the city. By the early twentieth century, black families had expanded well north, across the railroad tracks, south of Second Street and three blocks east of the city's main business center. Less well-off black settlers had taken to tent life along the sandy

banks of the Canadian; one of their prominent communities became known as "Sandtown" because of the amount of sand brought into their homes after routine river flooding. Affluent and tenacious blacks arriving in Oklahoma City attempted to get north of the Rock Island railroad line to First Street, breaking the confines of the black ghetto. Ellison had no illusions about which side of the tracks he hoped to spend his life on.

Lewis Ellison was not quite a young man in the summer of 1909 when he made Ida Millsap his wife.[36] Born on December 19, 1884, Ida had left her own parents, Polk and Georgia Millsap, and her younger siblings still sharecropping on a farm in rural Walton County, Georgia.[37] She and Lewis had in common their refuge (though brief) in the city of Atlanta, where both had fled in their early twenties to escape rural life, and the couple apparently met in Tennessee.[38] An extremely attractive and shapely woman in her mid-twenties, Ida had seen quickly the advantages of a relationship with the former soldier in the open country. Good-looking and single, Ida attracted a great deal of attention. And Lewis was quite singular. Despite his tough exterior, he read poetry, introduced her to influential people in the city, and talked politics with her. The pioneering Ellisons certainly felt that Oklahoma had more to offer than Atlanta with its palpable race prejudice, that city's deadly riot of 1906 still being described in lurid detail as a catalyst for movement north or west.[39]

In the late teens and 1920s, the 300 block of Second Street became the black mecca for business and social life. Eventually it would be surpassed by Fourth Street, which would give way to Tenth Street, finally to be eclipsed by Twenty-third Street, in a steadily expanding northward stream of black Americans on the east side of Oklahoma City. But in 1910, when Lewis and Ida Ellison were first setting up household, Second Street was just a row of intermittent "ready cut" Sears and Roebuck frame bungalows, shotgun houses, wooden tenements, and false-front stores. While the generally temperate Oklahoma climate could shift swiftly to violence as gentle breezes spiraled into tornadoes, the area lacked the sticky heat that freedmen and their descendants had known along the Atlantic seaboard and the Mexican Gulf regions. Even to those living in sod dugouts, the new land seemed good, salubrious even. One of the new migrants to the area, Dr. W. L. Haywood, had come out to Oklahoma because the dry air was supposed to be good for his lungs. But most of the blacks pouring into the city on foot, by wagon, or by railcar came with the hope of encountering new freedom that the rude compromise of 1877 had ended in their native South.

By 1910, the Ellisons, married six months, were rooming with the three adult Randolphs and their five children in the large, two-story frame house at 407 East First Street, barely east of Stiles Avenue and next door to the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church. Ralph Ellison would later describe the

man who became his adopted grandfather as tall, "brown as smoked leather," and Indian-looking in appearance; but mainly J. D. Randolph was a prosperous man, well-liked by all races in the new state.[40] Born on October 19, 1862, in Adarville, Kentucky, to a Cherokee father and black mother, Jefferson Davis Randolph was named after the president of the secessionists and later adopted the surname of Randolph from the plantation where his family worked. He grew up in Gallatin, Tennessee, receiving his education from a private German tutor named Zanderwich. Randolph lit out for Oklahoma freedom with the other Boomers in 1898; he served as first principal of the public Douglass School for colored, and published the Territory's first black newspaper, *The Occidental Lighthouse*.[41]

Meeting the Randolphs was an unusual stroke of good fortune for the Ellisons; and it is possible that South Carolinian Johnson Whittaker introduced the new couple to the pillar of Negro Oklahoma City. J. D. Randolph had made something of himself and wanted in on the establishment. A man capable of voting for the Democrats, Randolph put himself in the path of political plums. While he headed Douglass, he earned the same salary as any other white Oklahoma instructor, $60 per month, a feat impossible in the old South.[42] But Randolph suffered on account of his political ambition, which some thought unprincipled. He was forced out of education by black Republicans for making alliances with the Democrats. After leaving the education field, he opened a drugstore and real estate business in conjunction with his son-in-law, W. H. Slaughter, another aggressive entrepreneur.

The Ellisons lived with the Randolph family, probably in a separate or semiprivate apartment attached to the main house on First Street, until after 1914. On the 1910 census, thirty-three-year-old Lewis listed himself as a "streetworker," like many of the other men on his block, involved in the rapid expansion of Oklahoma City's paved roads. His twenty-six-year-old wife answered the query of occupation with "none."[43] Lewis Ellison apparently had invested all of his money with his brother in a Tennessee venture and was now starting from scratch in Oklahoma. But his travels abroad, his military discipline and organizational expertise, and familiarity with weapons were strong assets in the new state.

Another asset was his significant prior contact with powerful whites—military officers, judges, quartermasters, lawyers, and businessmen. Ellison wasn't easily intimidated by loud talk, big words, or white skin. His counsel was valuable during the tense moments of the spring 1911 streetcar strike when Oklahoma Governor Charles N. Haskell declared martial law and deputized four hundred men under the leadership of building magnate Charles Colcord.[44] Organizational talent and the ability to read well separated Lewis Ellison from most of the other black workers who streamed into the territory. Given his important contacts in the black community, his goal of home ownership and

economic security seemed within reach. He struck up a relationship with J. D. Randolph, who had become one of the black community's most important men.

In addition to his tasks paving city roads, Lewis may have hired himself on to finish construction at the Colcord building, erected in 1910, one of the first steel and cement structures in the city. Colcord wanted his building to withstand such fires as the apocalyptic San Francisco fire that had melted steel frame structures; a worker with expertise in concrete and steel would have obtained immediate employ. Enormous packinghouses also went up in 1910 that required heavy labor; and the general boom of the period afforded work for anyone familiar with brick masonry.

On his job Lewis came in contact with other veterans who gathered and drank at the local Spanish American War club. Socialists and their theories of state-controlled utilities and well-stocked schools percolated on the political scene, attracting the constituency left from the Populist movement of the 1890s and the unfulfilled progressive promises of the Democrats. With growth lapping over its belt, Oklahoma offered the chance for even the black migrants to enjoy something new and precipitous.

But the tension over precisely how much blacks would be enabled to prosper and exercise freedom, precisely what form would their social and political acceptance take, never disappeared. Soon enough on East First Street, the question of black enfranchisement became cloudier. Segregation had arrived in Oklahoma when the Democrats took over the legislature during the constitutional convention of 1906–1907. Race prejudice began to thicken, with white Oklahomans segregating the new state, making it remarkably similar to Texas and Arkansas in custom and mores. William "Alfalfa Bill" Murray wrote into Oklahoma's state constitution her segregated schooling clauses, legalizing jim crow. In October 1910, the state legislature passed a notorious grandfather clause, automatically enfranchising those whose relatives had voted prior to 1866 and requiring everyone else to pass a rigorous literacy test. Only blacks who could read, write, and recite the state constitution would be allowed to vote, a test that could be passed or failed according to the mood of the interviewer. By the time Lewis and Ida moved to their rooms in the Randolph home on the hill overlooking the Rock Island and Pacific rail yards and switching station, "colored" and "white" were identities gaining more distinct and polarized significance. Black settlers responded to the change in racial attitude with their feet. More than a thousand migrated to the Canadian plains in Saskatchewan and Alberta between 1908 and 1911.[45] The continued race prejudice and swelling race pride affected a small minority quite profoundly. Organizing throughout the state's all-black towns, Chief Alfred C. Sam of the Akim Nation repatriated sixty Oklahoma Negroes to West Africa in 1914.[46]

About eighteen months following Ralph's birth, anxious for more space and privacy, and preparing themselves for more children, the Ellisons moved out of their rooms with the Randolphs and into a single-family house at 218 North Stiles Avenue. Though faced with the demands of a baby, Ida spent considerable time in political meetings and canvassed local neighborhoods for the socialist gubernatorial candidate, coal miner Fred Holt.[47] Under the socialist platform Ida espoused, state government would take over ownership of large-scale mining, oil, cotton, and telephone industries; provide free schoolbooks for students; dispose of poll taxes; admit women to suffrage on the same terms as men; and institute an eight-hour workday.[48] Wanting to invigorate local politics, Ida was drawn to the socialist agenda. The Republicans in Oklahoma had chosen to sacrifice their black constituency by selecting a lily white platform that appealed to white voters with traditional Southern prejudices. The Democratic Party, despite well-publicized exceptions and the occasional backroom deal, was anathema to black people, basing its platform on the racist principles of the Confederate South. In presidential election year 1914, Ida continued her pollstering, and supported Socialist candidate Eugene Debs for president.

Notwithstanding the hard conditions for blacks in Oklahoma, the dream of a better way of life did not fail Lewis and Ida. The house at 218 North Stiles was a recently built, narrow, single-story, wood-frame house, only two blocks around the corner from J. D. Randolph. Though a substantial number of blacks still lived in Southtown, Lewis and Ida were part of the black vanguard, pushing north and east in search of decent, affordable housing. Unhappy with the vice and the disease associated with the Black Bottom, they were resisting residential segregation. The Ellisons were part of a boom that saw a quickening black real estate explosion as their relatively new neighborhood, the Military Addition, filled up and gave way to the Phillips Addition, extending several blocks east. They had not moved to the remote American West to remain locked in patterns of residential jim crow.

Community stalwart J. D. Randolph probably rented the Stiles Avenue home to the young family. The Ellisons occupied the last house on the eastern side of the avenue, on a slight ridge overlooking the rear of Second Street. By 1914, Second Street was a promising black commercial hub of wood-frame businesses, including Andrew Rushing's cafe and Dr. Webster Slaughter's office on the floor above the Cove Pharmacy. Edna Randolph Slaughter served as proprietor of the pharmacy while her dentist husband T. J., Lewis's close friend, administered to patients upstairs. Lewis got to know the restaurateur Andrew Rushing's reliable teenage son Jimmy and made regular visits to his friend Slaughter. The era of the first large settlement in Oklahoma was auspicious for the ex-slaves and their descendants. Black men like Rushing and the successful S. D. Lyons, a hair cream salesman, were beginning to make

names for themselves. Even small shop owners with little book learning could lay claim to the middle class and surge over the boundary of the railroad tracks. After saving his money from his jobs in construction, in street work, and as a teamster, Lewis went into business for himself, becoming an ice and coal dealer.

By 1916 the ice and coal business was prosperous enough for the Ellison family to move a block east of Stiles Avenue to 314 North Byers, a spacious home overlooking the Bryant School. Again, Lewis and his family were the ambassadors of the colored race, facing white families at the 400 block of Byers as well as on the entirety of Third Street. For the time being, relationships with whites were amicable. The move to North Byers took the Ellisons to the edge of Third Street, a quiet block whose only black resident was Abraham Baxter. Third Street heralded success, with its paved roads, well-groomed lawns, and backyards for playful children. Lewis was fulfilling the American dream, moving his family into a tree-lined residential neighborhood and putting a quarter-mile between them and the crowded rooming house where they had started. J. D. Randolph, too, had made a move, selling his home on First Street for a more serene dwelling, while an economic upswing jammed Second Street with doctors' offices, undertakers, and restaurants. The eateries and entertainment places catered to a younger, transient crowd, and Second and First Streets gained a reputation as being a little unruly. By the 1920s, when a scuffle or the report of a pistol was no longer unfamiliar, one name linked to the section was the "Bloody Bucket," though the business area never quite duplicated the squalor of East Main and East Grand Streets south of the railroad tracks. The different expectations of black and white pioneers in the new city continued on their separate courses. Oklahoma City was fast trying to lose her image as a Dodge City, with an urbanizing spirit that affected Lewis and Ida as they moved to gain more respectable neighbors. The city directory in 1916 announced that Oklahoma City was "splendidly governed and free from any 'Frontierism.'"[49]

The unruliness of parts of the new city grated less against the Ellisons than did their gradual but effective exclusion from city and state politics. They had anchored themselves to the Territory with Booker T. Washington's idea that political influence was based on economic leverage. Lewis and Ida aimed to provide a completely different life for their children, psychologically and materially. They spent evenings talking about the effects of environment on children. They hoped for stunning success for their young child, who was two generations removed from slavery and far from the plantations. This boy would have as many material advantages as they could afford, and they wouldn't fasten the chains of caste to his spirit. He was not to spend his life laying railroad trestles or facing down a judge advocate's decree. After their son's birth, they made a point of cerebrally engaging little Ralph, easing the

boundaries between the world of the adult and the world of the child, expecting a focused attention span and a surefooted memory. The Ellisons' unusual program paid off, and little Ralph seems to have shown exceptional early mental development. The family legend held that he walked at six months and spoke sentences at the age of two.[50] He read just as easily and quickly, and enjoyed his family's attention.

As a toddler, Ralph was unaware of the unusual aspects of his relationship with his father. Lewis Ellison and his son Ralph were inseparable. As soon as the little boy could ride on top of the wagon, Lewis took Ralph with him when he made his coal and ice deliveries. Instead of inhabiting a world with a sharp boundary between feminine care and masculine discipline, Ralph went to work with his father and enjoyed the former soldier's nurturing. His relationship with other adults was unusual, too. The circle of adults frequenting the Ellison household included the Randolphs, the Slaughters, and the Rushings, among other literate blacks—and even whites, like Metropolitan Life insurance agent Mr. Lilly, who came over to break bread with the family. They all were intrigued by Ralph's curious middle name.[51] All seemed to take pride in revealing their knowledge of Emerson, America's premier philosopher, perhaps to one another as much as to the three-year-old child. Ralph felt the extra attention turn sour as the intense focus on the "Emerson" hiding behind his name obscured the existence of Ralph Waldo *Ellison.* He had no idea why the "Waldo" part of his name attracted such regard. Ralph battled to assert his own individual personality and character.

In the two-block radius bounded by Walnut, Stiles, First, and Second, the growing black community satisfied its social needs. The small family enjoyed evenings on Peach Avenue with Lewis's sister Lucretia Brown and her family. The Browns, who had migrated to Oklahoma around the same time as Lewis and Ida, lived in Westtown, one of the small black enclaves distant from the eastern part of Oklahoma City.[52] In the years before widespread radio and cinema, families entertained themselves, especially with music. Ellison told interviewers that his earliest memory was of learning the song "I'm Dark Brown, Chocolate to the Bone" from his father and being schooled in the proper way to perform the Eagle Rock, the popular blues dance step of the early 1910s.[53] While Ralph's Peach Avenue cousins played "Squeeze Me" on the piano, Lewis taught him how to cock his head and rock his hips to the music, likely meriting an eyebrow of caution from Ida.

Ralph's early years had an aura of gentle invincibility. In the backyard of the house on Bryant Avenue, he raced his tricycle and tried to make friends with the fighting cocks that roamed the alley.[54] Some days, when not imagining himself a fireman, he observed the transformation of the wooden Bryant elementary school into a modern brick structure. Ralph began to meet the children of the vibrant and influential preacher Ezelle W. Perry of Tabernacle

Baptist Church, including Darlene, who was his age. And Ida was pregnant again. Though life was hardly easy, the future looked bright for the Ellisons.

On June 19, 1916, Lewis was carrying Ralph with him as he made his way over to Stephens Ice and Ice Cream company, where he loaded up several blocks of ice, and then picked his way through the crowded streets to his customers. His custom was to sit his small son on the wagon, which was covered with sawdust and canvas to keep the ice from melting, and to drive his team around to local grocers and private homes, talking to the boy throughout the day. This was an act of affection for Ida as well as Ralph, since it eased her burden of caring for a rambunctious child while eight months' pregnant. Lewis loved being his own boss and conducting his own transactions, getting to know the city and making connections. Still, his work could be demanding, depending upon the weight of the blocks of ice he was trying to move. Off and on he employed Andrew Rushing's fourteen-year-old boy Jimmy, short but powerfully built, to help him with his deliveries. Of greater concern to him was the compounded medical condition he seemed to have developed during his years in the Army. His stomach pains had become less bearable, and he was frequently doubled over in pain. On that hot June day when grocers would buy all the ice that he could haul, Lewis and three-year-old Ralph brought a delivery to Salter's grocery store. Lewis propped open the large metal plates in the sidewalk, hoisted a block of ice onto his shoulders, and headed for the dirt cellar, his young son on the wagon. Ralph heard him slip halfway down, heard the thud of the ice. The block sliced into Lewis's side, puncturing the stomach wall inflamed by an ulcer and causing massive hemorrhaging.[55] Lewis was rushed to the University Hospital at the northeast corner of Second Street and Stiles, and someone took the shaken youngster home.

Doctors expressed little hope for Lewis's condition from the beginning. While they had stopped the bleeding, they'd been unable to close the wound because of excessive inflammation and infection. Ida herself was in little position to be of much help as she recovered from giving birth to another healthy son, Herbert, in June. While doctors debated the appropriate surgery to take, Lewis's infections spread. Around the middle of July, they determined to try an experimental surgery. Ida and Ralph went to the hospital on July 18 to see Lewis before the operation, which was dangerous and uncertain enough to warrant the admission of a small child into the hospital ward room. The family huddled together briefly, with Lewis concealing his pain from his son. It was a meeting that became a poignant memory for Ralph, and it was also the beginning of his loneliness. In 1956, Ellison rendered the final interaction with his father in vivid and understandably celebratory detail. While it doesn't necessarily provide the details of historically verifiable reality, this passage excerpted from "Tell It Like It Is Baby" suggests a great deal about how Ellison emotionally responded to his father's sickness and death.

> We had said good-by and he had made me a present of the tiny pink and yellow wild flowers that had stood in the vase on the window sill, had put a blue cornflower in my lapel. Then a nurse and two attendants had wheeled in a table and put him on it. He was quite tall and I could see the pain in his face as they moved him. But when they got him covered his feet made little tents of the sheet and he made me a joke about it, just as he had many times before. He smiled then and said good-by once more, and I had watched, holding on to the cold white metal of the hospital bed as they wheeled him away. The white door closed quietly and I just stood there, looking at nothing at all. Nearby I could hear my mother talking quietly with the physician. He was explaining and she was asking questions. They didn't talk long, and when they finished we went out of the room for the last time. Holding on to my wrist as I clutched my flowers in my fist, my mother led me down the silent corridor heavy with the fumes of chloroform. She hurried me along. Ahead of us I saw a door swing ajar and watched it, but no one came out, then as we passed I looked inside to see him, lying in a great tub-like basin, waiting to be prepared for his last surgery. I could see his long legs, his knees propped up and his toes flexing as he rested there with his arms folded over his chest, looking at me quite calmly, like a kindly king in his bath. I had only a glimpse, then we were past. We had taken the elevator then and the nurse had allowed me to hold the control and she had laughed and talked with me as we went down to the street. Outside, as we moved along the winding drive into the blazing sun, I had told my mother but she wouldn't believe that I had seen him. I had though, and he had looked at me and smiled. It was the last time I saw my father alive.[56]

Ellison's memoir provides some clues to the gravity of the situation. Ida brought Ralph to the hospital on that day probably because she knew that the surgeon, Dr. L. E. Sauerport, was gambling with her husband's life on the operating table; she wanted to give the boy a final chance to see his father alive. Lewis was majestic for the occasion and bestowed gifts of beauty on his tiny son (who began to see himself as a prince or an heir), dressed up for the visit and somber. Ralph probably had been kept out of the hospital and was pleased to glimpse his father, whom he saw as a giant man of huge proportions, a figure whose immensity could only be taken in through snatches of vision. The elevator operator missed the gravity of the situation and joked with Ralph, letting him control the machine as they sped toward earth, leaving Lewis in the sky.

But most consequential to Ralph's development was Ida's refusal to believe her son's words, despite his attempts at explanation. Ida played the role of skeptic, refusing to believe that her son had seen his father in the operating room. Throughout Ellison's life, his mother would personify the forces of realism and materiality, pulling Ralph when he wanted to linger, and ignoring the precious gift from Lewis, yoking the little boy by the same arm

that had held the precious flowers. Ida's challenge to the young boy's version of reality in an extremely powerful emotional experience, a reality perceived surreptitiously—a snatch of a glimpse around a corridor—appointed the imagination as a potential conduit to continue his paternal relationship. Ralph's inability to persuade his mother that the glimpse was real surfaces as an important moment in his incipient understanding of the limitations of his language; his sense of reality was shaken because he could not find words to convince his mother. In his tearful experience, this inadequacy of language fostered his creative imagination. His determination to find ways to prove his experience and substantiate himself combined with the perplexing and unique name he had been stuck with and was unable to figure out produced the "dreamy" quality attributed to the young boy by his peers. Confronted with a profound moment of youthful experience, he had been unable to find the words to make it real. Ralph became a little boy looking for something.

One day after the experimental surgery, on July 19, 1916, Lewis Ellison died.[57] The Ellison family patriarch was killed by an abscess, or pus-filled lesion, of the liver. Ida scraped together enough money to pay Tucker's funeral home and on July 23, 1916, four days after his death, had her thirty-nine-year-old husband buried at the integrated Fairlawn Cemetery on the west side of Oklahoma City.[58] Numb during the entire ceremony in Lewis's honor, Ralph felt, as he later wrote, "bewildered" and "horrified," his senses too overcome even to allow him to shed tears.[59] Of his visits to the cemetery, he always remembered the "raw red clay mounds, the crude granite stones, the wild countryside."[60] Undoubtedly the older men and women at the funeral implored the young boy to be courageous and repress his emotions. One thing that he carried away from the funeral was an intensifying sense of willpower that refused to let him forget the day or what Lewis looked like. For Ralph Ellison, apparitions of his father would remain with him throughout the rest of his life, as he hoped for a reunion with the loving father he had known only too briefly.[61] In Ralph's earliest years, his family had been only moderately prosperous, but upwardly mobile; and he strove throughout his life to uphold that vision, that special aura, of his family. Without much to keep alive his connection to Lewis, Ralph pressed his early years tightly to his heart and turned bitter times attractive. He generally described his childhood years of lack as though filled with charm.

The death of Lewis Ellison devastated the family emotionally and financially. Lewis's death marked the beginning of years of no-frills living, when Ralph disciplined himself to obtain essentials and regularly went without. The little boy on Byers Street began to know the meaning of sacrifice. On Lewis's death certificate, Ida Ellison listed her young family's address not at 314 Byers but at 406 Byers, an address that did not exist, and in a block where no colored people lived. Lewis's stay in the hospital probably had wiped out whatever savings he may have squirreled away, and the address at

406 Byers may have been a ruse to defeat bill collectors. Or Ida may have already been asked to leave her new home for temporary lodging with a generous neighbor. When Lewis died, the Ellisons had been on the upswing; Ralph had a tricycle. Now he wouldn't ride a bike until he started working for Randolph's pharmacy as a teenage delivery boy. As the country eased out of its wartime boom economy, many of Ralph's classmates knew that in theory they were poor, particularly in comparison with whites. Yet few were as poor as the Ellisons.

In his grief over Lewis, Ralph was either glum and withdrawn or furious. It was probably around this time that he began stuttering, a condition that struck him especially during his wrathful moments. Ida, engrossed with the newborn infant she had decided to name Herbert Maurice, had less time for Ralph. Other adults were of little comfort. The "Emerson" queries and ribbings now turned gravely sour and made Ralph silent as he came to terms with the death of his father and the deep pain at permanently losing a guide, comforter, and friend. He had suffered the amputation of a considerable piece of himself; gone was the figure for him to emulate happily. Now Ralph indulged in revenge fantasies, cold with what he called "blue murder," to eradicate those who called him Emerson, partly, no doubt, because the neighbors and friends threatened to erase his surname and hence Lewis's presence.

In moments of solitude, Ralph comforted himself with a recurring fantasy in which he emerged from the cold of the street into the warmth of the sun to see Lewis "rushing toward me with a smile of recognition and outstretched arms." Until he was thirteen, Ralph felt that the grim "processes of time and the cold facts of death" were held in abeyance through the power of this dream.[62] The trauma also seems to have influenced Ralph's youthful approach to people; a welcome smile and surface grace would give way to a refusal to become deeply intimate or to make himself vulnerable. Ralph became affable, but always managed a considerable emotional reserve. He was thought both quiet and aloof. And then, to cauterize his grief and to begin finding his own sense of self, Ralph began to experience more complex feelings toward his father. Instead of solely blind adoration and loneliness, Ralph began to feel abandoned and misdirected, perhaps even angry. Lewis Ellison's absence, coupled with Ralph's peculiar name, caused the youngster to resent the older man. The young man put his conscious mind to the task of asserting a distinctive identity, unassociated with the painful episode. One of the earliest references to Lewis in his writing is characterized by a prickly, almost indifferent tone. Lewis had "named me after someone called Ralph Waldo Emerson, and then, when I was three, he died."[63] Lewis's ritualistic act of naming, in congruence with his sudden death, confounded the young boy, just as the puzzling last words of the grandfather in *Invisible Man* mystify his heirs. However unintentionally, Lewis had set Ralph a-running.